

Two intrepid travellers tell their story after they ventured into

Mallinger 1980

The Heart of Darkness

5588

For those with the right passports an African Safari is the "in-thing". A chance to sneak back into the heart of the dark continent and find out what wildlife is all about. Or what it is not all about as two intrepid travellers, Gernot and Melanie Mallinger, found during a recent jaunt along the continent's lesser known routes where tourists seldom go.

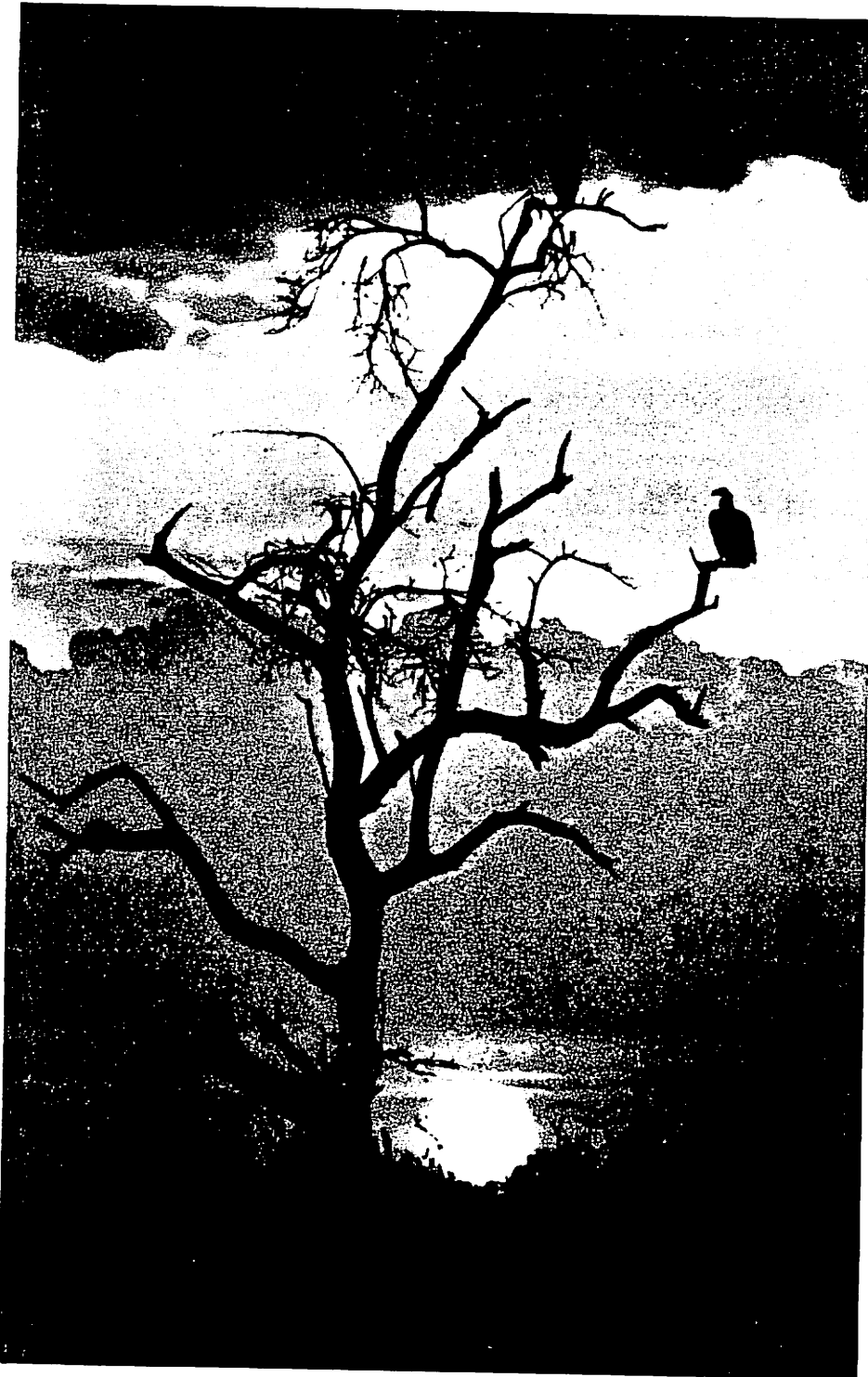
In fact they were hardly an hour's drive along a jungle track into Zaire when a soldier stopped their Land Cruiser and demanded a lift to the next village. "He carried an enormous zip-up bag," recalls Melanie, "and as he climbed into the back of the Cruiser we heard the most awful scream. We froze in horror, then turned to the soldier and asked in broken French what on earth had screamed like that."

The soldier, beaming from ear to ear at their interest, dug into his bag and, like a magician, conjured up a baby duiker. "It couldn't have been more than three days old, as the umbilical cord was still attached," says Melanie. The soldier said he had killed and eaten the mother and was now going to fatten the baby for the pot. "But I don't think it could have lived for much longer as it was near starved when we saw it," adds Melanie. The fellow was trying to feed it on grass.

That was their first encounter of what they call "the Africans inhumanity to animals". It was by no means their last.

A few days later they were camped on the banks of a river near Banalia — one of Zaire's villages. It was evening and their meat was cooking on the fire when two young boys appeared out of the bush. They were carrying a very young blue monkey. Says a disgusted Melanie: "Do you know they were prepared to swap the animal for 'kaboi' (cowboy or as we know it) denim jeans, shirts, in fact anything."

On another occasion they were offered a pangolin. Recounts Melanie, "This wretched creature was hanging from a branch by a piece of rope tied about its tail. The animal was petrified and had its front paws covering its eyes in an effort to try and hide from this hideous world into which it had been born. It was a pitiful sight and I just burst



into tears. 'Gernot being a far more realistic person than I am, refused my pleas to take the pangolin along. Its captors were prepared to exchange it for a cheap ball-point pen.

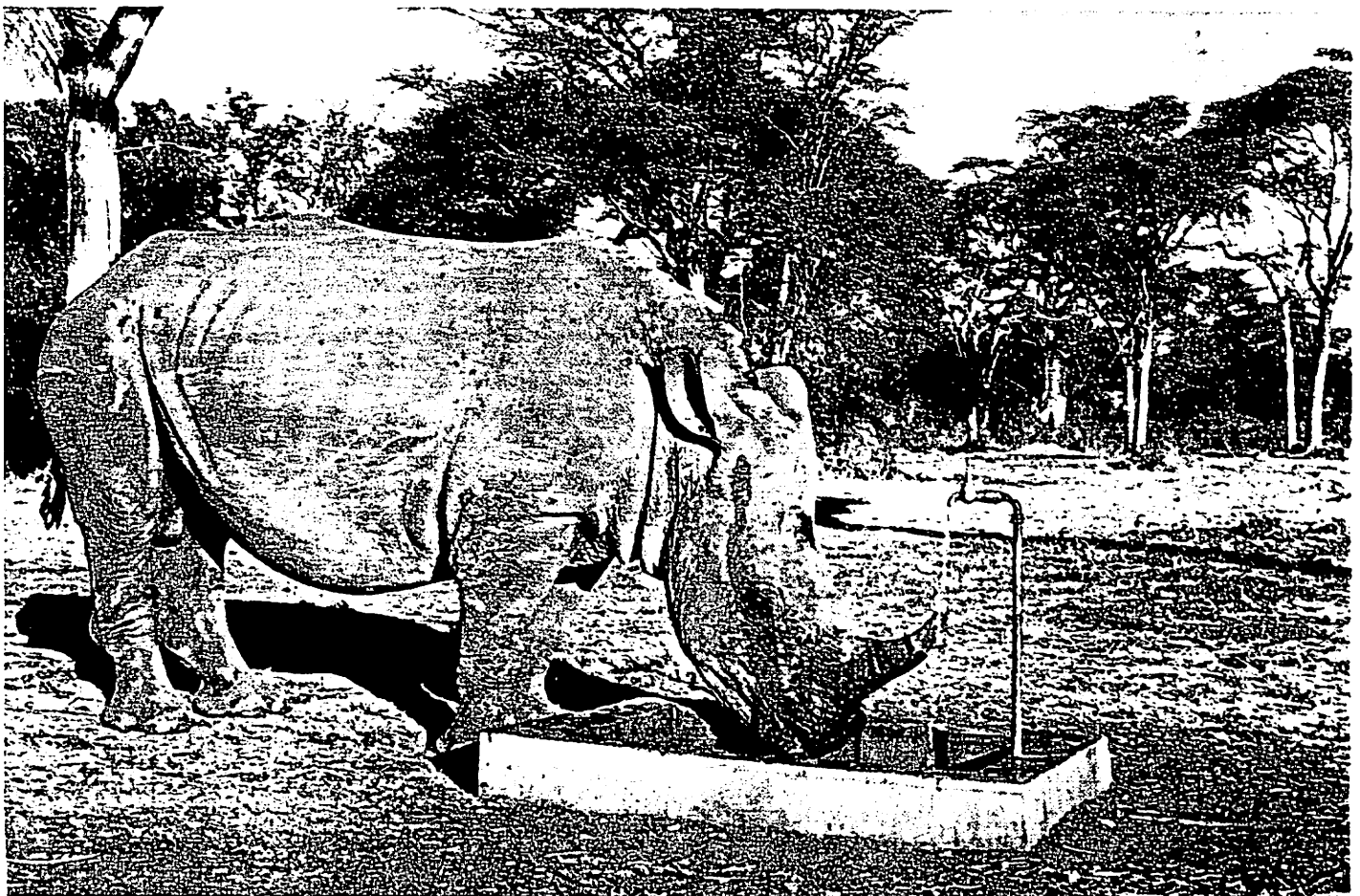
Later the Malingers met a Swiss couple who had taken a chance and rescued a young genet from the hands of road-side pedlars in the Cameroun. It had tamed quickly, responded to the name of Zakia and was smuggled across numerous borders, as he spent the daylight hours asleep in the woman's handbag. At night he would go out hunting but always returned to their Landrover with his prey. Each morning they awoke to find bits and pieces of frogs, mice and an assortment of insects littering their sleeping bags — proof of the genet's hearty meal.

It was with a sense of optimism that the Malinger's crossed the border into Kenya. Things would have to be better there, they reasoned. But they weren't.

"Corruption is rife and each and every official is on the take," explains Melanie. "Even the wildlife conservation officials profit from game trophies they themselves have poached. There should be a rescheduling of the training course in Meru National Park. The game rangers are consumers not conservationists.

"Believe it or not we came across a party of rangers eating a gerenuk right inside the boundaries of the park. This was one of the animals they were supposed to be protecting. At least they were embarrassed at being caught."

It was useless reporting these sort of incidents, they claim, as complaints fell on deaf ears.





While at Meru the couple met some South African expatriots — six white rhino which had been imported from Zululand some years earlier. The Kenyan government had bought them to build up the almost non-existent white rhino population in East Africa.

The expatriots were doing well. Three calves had been born and they had settled down. They were even quite friendly. "One of the males made frequent visits to our camp and insisted on a drink of tap water," says Melanie. "Incredibly he showed no fear of us and we grew rather attached to him and looked forward to his visits."

Two weeks after they had left Meru they came across this report in a local newspaper: "Only the calves survived because their horns were too small and not valuable enough. Only because of this were their death warrants not

signed. We have no idea whether the application to have the horns amputated has been granted. Hopefully it will so that they can lead fairly protected lives without the dangers of being poached."

Although this sordid side weighs heavily with the Mallingers there were also lighter moments. Like the day at Amboseli when they were lounging round a swimming pool during the hot midday hours. About 25 metres away was a waterhole. Unlike our local parks, those in East Africa have no protective fence. A row of white-washed stones marks the boundary.

As if to greet the bus-load of tourists which had just arrived a lone bull elephant came wandering out of the bush and nonchalantly made his way to the waterhole while the excited tourists clicked away with everything from instamatics to Hasselblads. This was

Africa up close.

Of course for the instamatic photographer a picture of an elephant 25 metres away is not good enough, so some of them tip-toed as close to the elephant as possible. This intrusion the bull would not tolerate so waving his trunk to and fro he made a mock charge.

Great fun, laughed the tourists. Nothing like a wildlife game with a real live African elephant. But soon the charges became serious and it wasn't until someone was nearly trampled that they gave up and the wardens were called to drive the infuriated bull away.

One thing the Mallingers did learn. Those pictures of Africa's plains scattered with game are no more. "We visited 12 countries and it was in Kenya alone that we spotted game outside the boundaries of national parks, and then only gazelle and giraffe," says Melanie.

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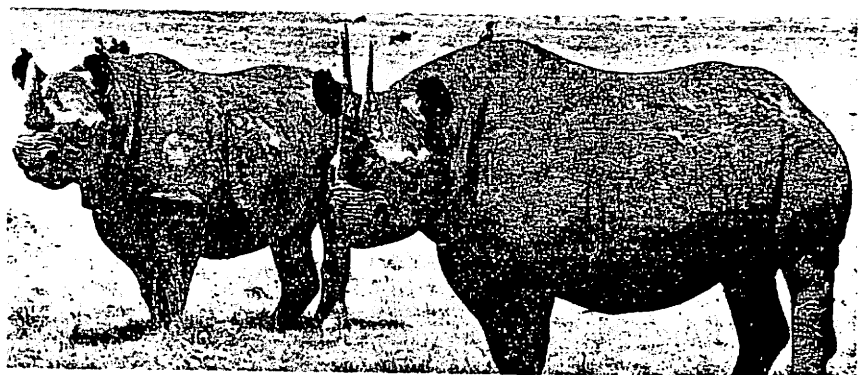
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Table Mountain is undoubtedly South Africa's most famous mountain, it is also probably the most threatened. At its feet lies a fast growing metropolis of more than a million people who look to the mountain for recreation. In his article on page 19 Dr A V Hall writes that 75 species of the Peninsula's flora are threatened with extinction. Apart from that whole sweeps of the mountain are now covered by alien vegetation which are eating into the delicate fynbos. The Hey Commission's report on Table Mountain is now 21-months old and little observable action has come from it, although legislation is now being prepared. But, says Dr Hall, the situation is urgent and heavy spending to save this area is more than justified.



The status of the black rhino in Africa is far from happy. Populations have been decimated in Tanzania and Kenya in the poachers' mad rush to secure as much rhino horn as possible. Despite bans on trade in rhino horn a lucrative black market flourishes in the east and horns now fetch between R500 and R750 an ounce. Last year the World Wildlife Fund launched a campaign to save the black rhino, and this year the campaign was taken up in South Africa by the Wildlife Society, SA Nature Foundation, and the Endangered Wildlife Trust.



Die IUCN het in Maart vanjaar sy internasionale strategie vir natuur-bewaring vrygestel. Dit het die knellendste strydpunte wat die wêreld onder die oë moet sien beklemtoon en by regerings aangedring dat nasionale bewaringsbeleidsake voorrang moet kry. Na maandelange harde werk het die Natuurlewevereniging 'n beleidstuk opgestel en 'n strategie vir omgewingsbewaring in Suid-Afrika uitgewerk. Die verslag het die toestand van ons omgewing deeglik onder the loop geneem. Dit spel die ramp waarop ons afstuur klinkklaar in een enkele woord uit: bevolkingsontploffing!